

Labels: Motivation from the Very First Day

By Bernardo Rodríguez Caparrini

"What can I do on the first day of class?" This is a question that we, as English teachers, always ask ourselves at the beginning of each school year.

Basic Principles

I think it is the wish of every English teacher to succeed in creating in their students a positive attitude towards the language; and the achievement of this goal will very much depend on our ability to motivate students in our first contact with them.

It is usually the case that learners of a foreign language-especially "false beginners"-tend to underrate themselves. They think they know less than what they really know. Also, the students are not aware of the presence and importance of the English language, especially in countries like Spain, in which English has no special standing; and they consider English as just one more theoretical subject to be studied, with no recognition of its practical use as an international language.

To serve the double purpose of creating a positive attitude towards the language and of motivating them, I developed an activity for the first day of class which I have called "labels."

Using Authentic Material

I noticed that many goods which could be bought in Spain-including articles of clothing, food products, drinks and other consumer goods-had "labels" with messages written in English. This was true not only of imported items, but also of those made in Spain. When I had collected enough of these "labels," I selected seven of them which would be suitable for the activity I had in mind and for the age and level of my students (15 and 16 years-old, second form, non-compulsory secondary education).

Procedure

Before having the students perform the activity, I tried to make clear what they were supposed to do, explaining that it was not necessary to understand every single word in the labels to answer the proposed questions. This said, I gave to each student a personal handout and let them read the

labels. It is important to allow them enough time to read before giving out the answers because otherwise they will attempt to answer the questions without reading through the labels first.

I went through the sections on comprehension questions and key words, to solve any difficulties that students had with the wording of the questions; but at no time did I translate the labels or allow the use of dictionaries, since that would distort the purpose of the exercise. Once the students were ready to start the activity, I gave them twenty minutes to work out the answers individually.

Correcting the Exercise

After the time ran out, the answer sheet was corrected in class in the following way: for the comprehension questions, I asked a different student each time until all six questions were answered. At this stage most of the students got all the answers right, except for label four, which proved to be the most difficult one. For key words, I followed the same procedure, but this time I told students to feel free to participate even though they were not called upon.

I accepted key words corresponding to trademarks or brands of products, provided that the student explained in English why s/he had chosen those words. If a student chose a word from a label which the rest of the class did not consider to be a "key" word, he or she had to justify his/her choice, so that sometimes there was a discussion between those who argued for and those who argued against the validity of the word. I insisted on the exchange being conducted in English. In the cases of disagreement after a debate, my view was usually accepted.

In the course of the correction of the students' answers, they were free to ask the teacher for any explanation regarding grammatical structure, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, style, etc. A space was left on the answer sheet for the translation of the key words into the students' mother tongue.

Conclusions

With the aid of this simple exercise we may have opened our students' eyes to the fact that the English language is not an abstract entity beyond their reach, but a universal language which they can understand and speak. If we have the ability to get the students involved in the activity, it will make them more confident about learning the language.

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